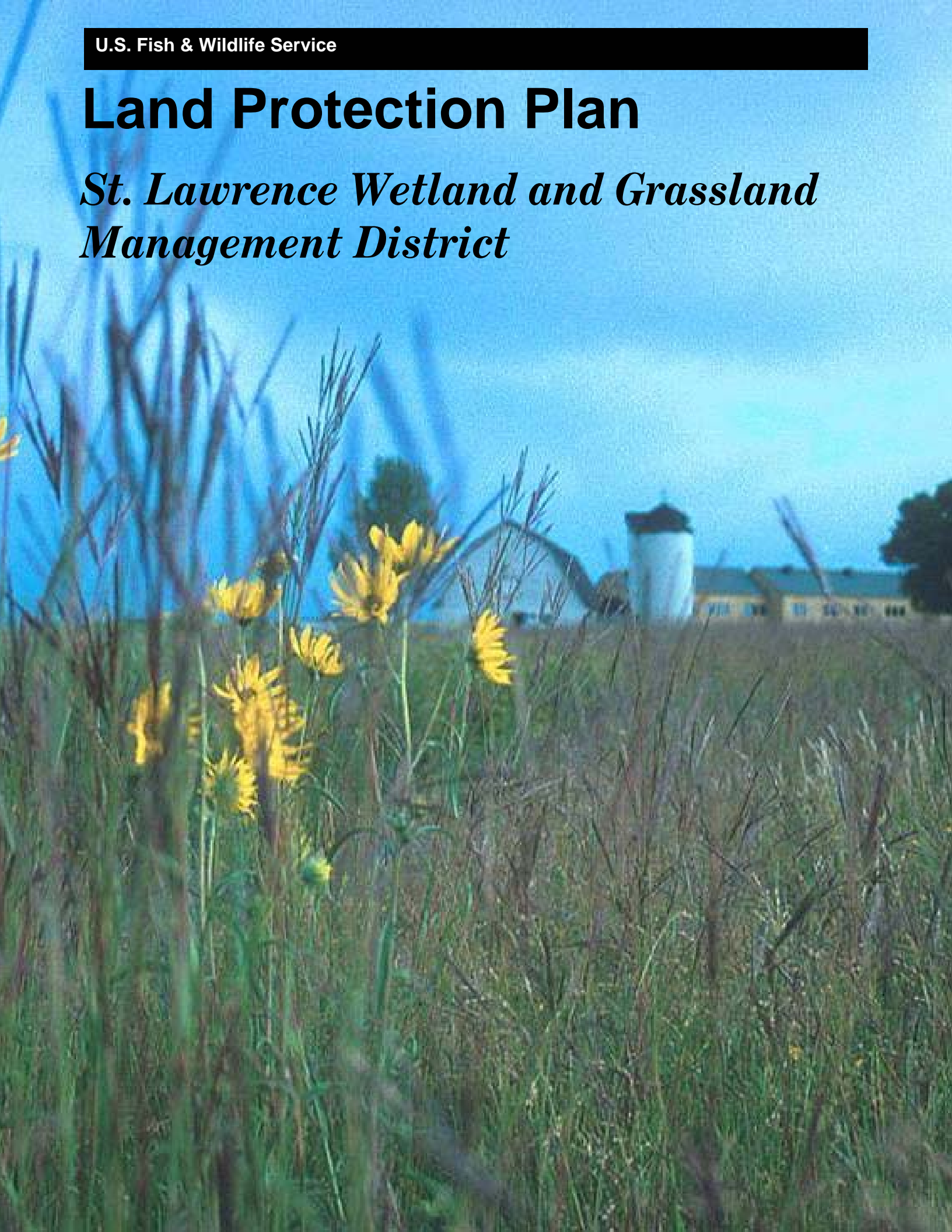


Land Protection Plan

St. Lawrence Wetland and Grassland Management District





Land Protection Plan for the St. Lawrence Wetland & Grassland Management District

July 2006

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Summary of Our Proposed Action

The rural character of our 8,000-acre focus area in the St. Lawrence Valley is likely to change over the next 10 to 20 years as trends in agricultural land use continue and pressures from residential and commercial development increase. The Service and its partners view the valley as a critically important landscape for the long-term protection and conservation of migratory birds and other wildlife.

We plan to purchase in fee title small tracts of land for designation as waterfowl production areas (WPAs) on approximately 1,600 acres, or 20 percent of our 8,000-acre focus area. We plan to surround those WPAs with approximately 6,400 acres of conservation easements we purchase from willing sellers on wetlands, grasslands and other important habitats, or 80 percent of our 8,000-acre focus area.

Introduction and Project Description

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service, we, our) developed this land protection plan for the St. Lawrence Wetland and Grassland Management District as a companion document to its

environmental assessment (EA) during the NEPA planning process. The purposes of this LPP are to provide acquisition guidelines for Service use and inform local landowners, government agencies, town supervisors, and the



Typical wetland in the St. Lawrence WMD, USFWS

public about our proposed acquisition priorities and permanent strategies for protecting important wetland and grassland habitats in the district.

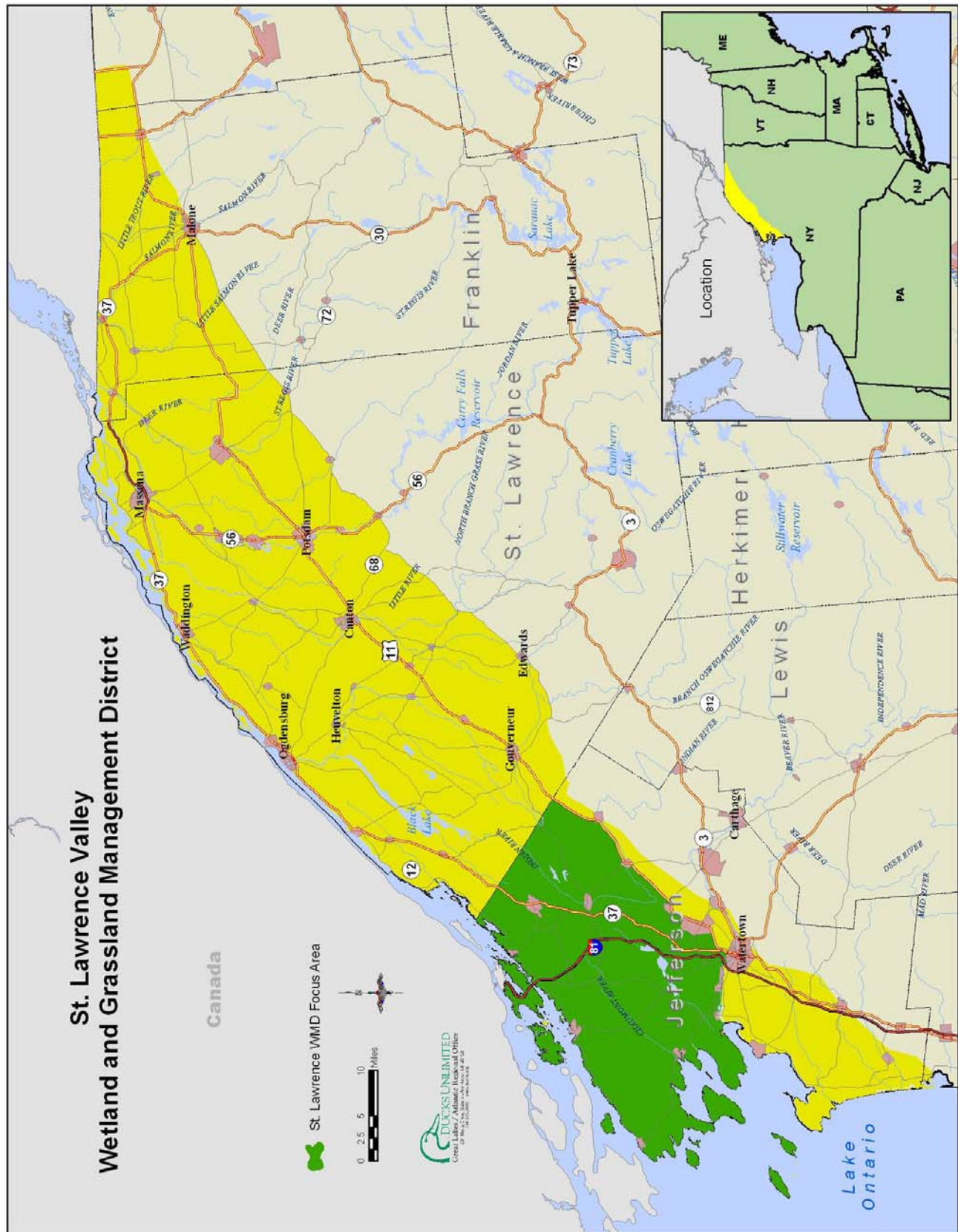
Located in the St. Lawrence Valley of northern New York State, the district encompasses 2 million acres in the lowland valley of Jefferson, St. Lawrence and Franklin counties (see map). It extends along the Thousand Island Region and the International Border in the St. Lawrence River with Ontario Province and, at its northern end, with Quebec Province. The ecological transition between the St. Lawrence lowlands and the Adirondack Mountains delineates the eastern boundary. The southwestern end of the district includes the shores and islands of eastern Lake Ontario (figure 1).

The Service has proposed a conservation plan for the district that includes the permanent protection of land in a focus area restricted to a portion of Jefferson County. Within that focus area, we hope to protect 8,000 acres of valuable breeding and migratory bird habitat.

We selected the focus area because of its high suitability for waterfowl production, its extensive grassland-nesting bird habitat, and its relative abundance and importance of shoreline habitat along Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River. However, our proposal specifically excludes the acquisition of prime agricultural land in the focus area. Its boundary avoids the concentration of Agricultural District land in southern Jefferson County.

We intend to purchase in fee title small tracts of land for designation as Waterfowl Production Areas (WPAs) on approximately 1,600 acres, or 20 percent of the 8,000-acre total. We plan to surround those WPAs with approximately 6,400 acres, or 80 percent of the 8,000 acres, in conservation easements we purchase or receive as donations from willing sellers on wetlands, grasslands and other important habitats in our focus area. Those conservation easements and WPAs would also connect and expand other conservation lands in the St. Lawrence Valley.

Figure 1. St. Lawrence Valley Wetland and Grassland Management District



The valley contains extensive agricultural grasslands interspersed with abundant freshwater wetlands, glaciated potholes, lakes, rivers and riparian corridors (figure 2). Compared with other areas in the northeastern United States, the mix of grasslands (350,000 acres) and wetlands (150,000 acres) in the valley is outstanding wildlife habitat. That largely intact landscape harbors nearly a complete suite of wildlife species, including waterfowl, bald eagle, black tern, savannah sparrow, rough-legged hawk, deer, turkey, beaver, and a healthy, diverse fishery. The valley is the most important area for waterfowl production in the Northeast. Waterfowl and other water-dependent species such as American bittern, northern pike and bass rely on the shoreline marshes, protected island bays and open water of the St. Lawrence River, while species such as the great blue heron rely on its numerous wetlands. Many grassland-nesting birds successfully breed and maintain stable populations in the valley, including eastern meadowlark, sedge wren, and grasshopper sparrow. The valley also shelters important breeding populations of birds listed as threatened in New York State, such as the common tern, black tern and northern harrier. Bald eagles nest and overwinter in the Thousand Islands Region. The valley is also a major migrating corridor and wintering area for a number of raptors. Collectively, the fish and wildlife resources in the valley have local, national, and international significance.

Landuse in the St. Lawrence WMD Focus Area

The map displays the land use in the St. Lawrence Watershed Management District (WMD) Focus Area. The area is color-coded according to the legend, showing various land use types. The map includes the St. Lawrence River, Lake Ontario, and surrounding land. Key locations labeled include Alton Place, La Fargeville, Deerpark, and various islands. The map is titled 'Landuse in the St. Lawrence WMD Focus Area'.

Legend:

- Priority Area
- Bare Land
- Cultivated Land
- Deciduous Forest
- Evergreen Forest
- Grassland
- High Intensity Developed
- Low Intensity Developed
- Mixed Forest
- Paustine Emergent Wetland
- Paustine Forested Wetland
- Paustine Scrub/Shrub Wetland
- Scrub/Shrub
- Water
- County
- Major Roads
 - Limited Access Highway
 - Highway
 - Local Roads
- City
- State
- Province

Map Labels: Alton Place, La Fargeville, Deerpark, St. Lawrence River, Lake Ontario, Canada, New York, Adams County, Jefferson County, Warren County, Schoharie County, Otsego County, Hamilton County, Albany County, Rensselaer County, Dutchess County, Sullivan County, Ulster County, Delaware County, Warren County, Schoharie County, Otsego County, Hamilton County, Albany County, Rensselaer County, Dutchess County, Sullivan County, Ulster County, Delaware County.

The fact that the valley remains biologically and ecologically intact is a tribute to its farmers, residents, and other conservation-minded individuals or groups who have long recognized what this unique landscape represents, and who have managed and cared for their farms and land as responsible stewards for sustained



Mallard drake, Erwin and Peggy Bauer USFWS

productivity and natural resource conservation. This proposal aims at ensuring that important wildlife habitat remains intact in perpetuity, maintaining the integrity of the landscape, and supporting the agricultural and conservation heritage of the valley.

The goals of the conservation proposal and the St. Lawrence WMD are to

- Protect, maintain, restore and enhance the quality and quantity of wetland and grassland resources of the St. Lawrence Valley to support a diversity of plants, animals and Trust Resources, particularly breeding and migrating waterfowl and other grassland nesting migratory species.
- Maintain the integrity of the unique ecological communities and rich natural resources of the St. Lawrence Valley by working cooperatively with private landowners, stakeholders and local communities in an ecologically sound, economically feasible and socially acceptable way.

- Provide opportunities for priority, high quality, wildlife-dependent public use where appropriate and compatible with wildlife and habitat goals, and the purposes for establishment.

Threats to and Status of Resources

The St. Lawrence Valley, especially parts of Jefferson County, is likely to undergo substantial change in land use over the next 10 to 20 years. A number of factors underlie that change, including concerns about how its impacts on the traditional agricultural and conservation heritage of the valley. Our EA presents a conservation proposal that is a positive, proactive step toward the perpetual support of wildlife values in the St. Lawrence WMD, and recognizes the significant contributions and benefit for wildlife of dairy farms and agricultural land use. If approved, that proposal would enable the Service to acquire a limited number of small tracts of land and easements to protect and enhance wildlife productivity and provide wildlife-oriented public use and recreation. It would also provide local towns and communities a previously unavailable mechanism for preserving open space, achieving local planning goals, and limiting residential and commercial development that would undermine wildlife values and fragment habitats.

The loss and fragmentation of habitat is especially problematic along the shoreline of Lake Ontario and the communities and islands of the St. Lawrence River; but it is also a concern on grassland fields throughout the focus area. Habitat loss is due primarily to the conversion of lands considered significant for wildlife and community open space. Summer homes, shoreline development and the pressures associated with human use are common reasons for that conversion, and often cause habitat fragmentation as well. In addition, residential and commercial development can present a substantial threat for aquatic ecosystems. Housing developments can add nutrients derived from sewage to streams and lakes. Development can result in the drainage of wetlands, infestations of invasive plants, and the introduction of non-native fish into the aquatic ecosystem. Excessive development can also detract from the aesthetic values that attract summer tourists throughout the focus area.

Our proposal for the permanent protection of important habitats is not a panacea; it will not provide widespread solutions for issues or conflicts in countywide land use. However, it may prove a critically important conservation tool for local towns and communities in the focus area to address specific issues of land use and the preservation of open space on a case-by-case basis. We have concluded that our easement and fee title capabilities should augment conservation measures throughout the St. Lawrence WMD and, that the perpetual protection of important habitats in the district is necessary to guarantee their future use by migratory birds and increase waterfowl production.

Agricultural Land Use

For more than a century, environmental conditions and socioeconomic factors that affected the St. Lawrence Valley promoted dairy farming and livestock production as its principal industries and the leading type of agriculture, perpetuating historic



Haying is an important activity for maintaining and sustaining grasslands, USFWS

land use patterns that made hayfields, pastureland and meadows the predominant crop and agricultural land cover. Presently, farmers and private landowners in the valley maintain approximately 350,000 acres of agricultural grasslands that support tremendous populations of grassland-dependent birds and wildlife. That acreage represents the largest contiguous block of grassed landscape anywhere in the northeastern United States, and is a valuable, significant resource. In other areas of the Northeast, grassland habitat is the most rapidly disappearing habitat type.

Agricultural grasslands are extremely valuable for nesting waterfowl and other ground nesting birds for several reasons:

(1) They constitute an abundant resource of large, contiguous blocks of open, early-successional habitat that satisfy avian life requisites and minimum home range size,

(2) They provide suitable nesting substrate and dense nesting cover during egg-laying and incubation stages of nesting,

(3) They generally lie close to more than 170,000 acres of diverse wetland complexes, and

(4) They often remain accessible and suitable throughout the bird nesting cycle because, due to climate and generally poor drainage conditions, farmers do not harvest much of the hay crop until after July, when most duck broods have moved to suitable wetland habitat and other young birds have fledged.

The continued abundance of waterfowl and other ground-nesting bird populations in the valley relates closely to present and future trends in agricultural land use. The long-term availability of large grasslands depends largely on the perpetuation of hayfields and other grassland habitats sustained by agricultural activities (haying, grazing, controlling brush, re-seeding, etc.). Very simply, without the predominant agricultural presence of dairy farms, mushroom farms and other farming influences that favorably affect land use in the valley, large blocks of grassland acreage would rapidly revert to brush and woodland habitat, which would seriously threaten avifauna and wildlife populations that depend on grassland and early successional habitat.

Over the past 25 years, agricultural land use in the valley tended toward the increasing abandonment of farmland. Agricultural statistics show declines in both the acreage farmed and the number of dairy farms. The remaining dairy farms that are economically viable and profitable tend to grow larger, incorporating the more productive and tillable lands from neighboring,

abandoned farms into their successful agribusiness operations, and allowing the less productive farmland to revert to brush or be used for other purposes. Despite those trends, milk production and agricultural output have remained stable and, in some cases, have increased. That results from (1) technological advances, (2) a shift toward more intensive (>100 cows) dairy operations that use an open stall-feedlot design, and (3) increased numbers of acres planted in corn, alfalfa and other row crops. Those trends in land use have resulted in an increase in brushy old-field habitat, a decline in grassland habitat, and an increase in habitat fragmentation. Consequently, the ecological value and inherent benefits that large, contiguous blocks of agricultural grassland historically have provided for wildlife are beginning to decline.

In the future, the global economy and other market forces will increasingly influence the dairy industry, agribusiness and agricultural land use in the valley. If the trends of the past 25 years continue, less grassland habitat suitable for nesting waterfowl and other ground-nesting bird species will be available. Our proposal for the permanent protection of 8,000 acres of important habitat in the St. Lawrence WMD will help mitigate those losses and ensure the continued availability of suitable grassland habitat in the future. Abandoned farms and marginal farmland will provide a prime focus and abundant opportunities for the Service to restore and manage wildlife habitat without jeopardizing or competing with productive, viable, agricultural endeavors.

Proposed Action

We intend to acquire in fee title and designate as WPAs about 1,600 acres of land, and surround them with conservation easements we purchase on about 6,400 acres of wetland and grassland in the focus area. We would acquire and establish WPAs only after town approval, and would open them to public use as our conceptual management plan describes. We have used our standard conservation easement agreements and the guidelines of the Small Wetland Acquisition Program (SWAP) successfully in other areas of the United States, and would use essentially the same guidelines, language and terms to minimize confusion, ease enforcement, and provide the necessary level of

resource protection in the focus area. The easement program would rely on voluntary enrollment, cooperative participation and compliance from landowners. District staff would check the easements annually to ensure compliance with the terms of those easements.

Subdivision and development for residential, commercial, or industrial purposes would not be permitted on those conservation easements or on the WPAs. The alteration of natural topography, the drainage of wetland, and the long-term conversion of grassland to other habitats would be prohibited. Over time, the viability, suitability and productivity of habitat

may decline, and require restoration or enhancement. We would encourage the owners of land under easement in need of assistance for the sustained productivity, maintenance, and longevity of grassland and wetland habitat to work with our district staff in arranging management options. Those options may include (1) active, direct intervention by WMD staff and equipment (e.g., mowing, establishing native warm-season grass stands, installing water control structures), (2) working with neighboring farmers and landowners to establish cooperative farming agreements (e.g., haying, re-seeding, or cropping to facilitate re-establishing grassland), or (3) working with other partners, cooperating agencies and organizations.

All easement land would remain in private ownership and on the tax rolls. Paying the property tax would remain the responsibility of the landowner. Public access to the land would remain under the control of the landowner.



Installing a water control structure on private land for wetland restoration and management, USFWS

For all of the land we acquire in fee title, we would pay annual revenue sharing payments to local taxing authorities to offset any tax losses. We would manage all of that land as part of the St. Lawrence WMD.

Another important component of our proposed action is the continuation and expansion of the private lands program, Partners for Fish and Wildlife. All of the projects in that program happen on private land; the land stays in private ownership. As we devote greater levels of funding and staffing to the district, we expect an increase in the number of projects and acres restored under the 10- to 30-year cooperative agreements of the partners program. Priority projects would include wetland and grassland restorations on private lands with conservation easements and on private lands adjacent to WPAs and easements. That would effectively increase the “block size” of suitable habitat available for wildlife.

The areas we are considering for wetland restoration are low drainages, potholes and basins that once held water, but have been drained, ditched, or degraded in some way. Plugging ditches, constructing earthen dikes and, in some cases, installing water control structures to return water to the site either permanently or intermittently can restore the hydrology and function of wetlands. That stimulates the reappearance of wetland plants and organisms, and restores biological integrity and ecological balance. The owners of restored wetlands can use and enjoy them for many purposes, including hunting, fishing, trapping, or viewing wildlife. Likewise, old fields and unproductive grasslands are eligible for grassland restoration under the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program. Techniques such as mowing, plowing, disking, reseeding and burning are used to restore private grasslands. Restored grasslands can be used for both wildlife conservation and agricultural purposes, if haying and grazing occur after July 15, when birds have finished nesting.

Protection Alternatives

Past and present agricultural practices in the valley, together with existing conservation programs and protected lands, are critical for maintaining its biological integrity. However, new threats and developments make its future uncertain.



The mix of habitats in the valley offers outstanding opportunities for wildlife and people, USFWS

The successful protection of wildlife habitat and natural resources in its 500,000 acres requires the cooperation of many partners. The alternatives for protection include no action, an expanded acquisition approach (12,000 acres), and our preferred alternative, which embodies a modest, 8,000-acre approach, using easements as the principal instrument for conservation.

The EA explores the consequences of no further action by the Service. The no action alternative would rely on existing programs and protected land ownership, and leave future wildlife management to other government agencies, landowners, and conservation groups. It is unlikely that other agencies or groups would provide permanent protection for the 8,000 acres of habitat suitable for wildlife if the Service does not. We consider unacceptable the consequences of the no action alternative, which led us to select the preferred alternative.

The EA also explores the consequences of an expanded acquisition alternative, which would increase the potential acreage of the proposal to 12,000 acres: half in easements and half in fee title acquisition. Because we recognize the concern among Jefferson County residents about the removal of

land from the tax base, despite revenue sharing payments to offset tax losses, the alternative we prefer focuses more on privately owned easements and less on acreage. We also consider 8,000 acres sufficient for meeting wildlife goals, especially because we would use acquisition in conjunction with an expanded private lands program and cooperative partnerships with other conservation organizations.

A strong, vibrant rural lifestyle, with farming as a significant land use, is one of the key components in ensuring the integrity of habitat and the protection of wildlife resources. The easement program and the SWAP in our preferred alternative would provide effective tools for conserving up to 8,000 acres, support the rural farming heritage, and complement other conservation in the district. WPAs would allow the intensive management of habitat and wildlife, as well as appropriate public uses, while easements would support that management and further ensure the protection of important habitats of the focus area in a cost-effective, socially acceptable way.

Priority Zones

We split the focus area into three priority zones to focus the acquisition of conservation easements and WPAs using the following criteria:

- connectivity to other protected and specially designated lands
- biologically significant for breeding mallards and Henslow's sparrows (indicator species).

Providing connectivity and linking wildlife habitat to protected lands are key elements we used in delineating these priority zones. The connectivity of habitats would help ensure that species such as mallards, which require diverse wetlands and grasslands close to each other, and species such as Henslow's sparrow, which require large blocks of grasslands, would have habitat sufficient for meeting their life cycle requirements. The mallard and Henslow's sparrow are good indicator species for nesting waterfowl, grassland-nesting birds and other important wildlife species. If the protection of habitat were adequate for ensuring the productivity of mallards and

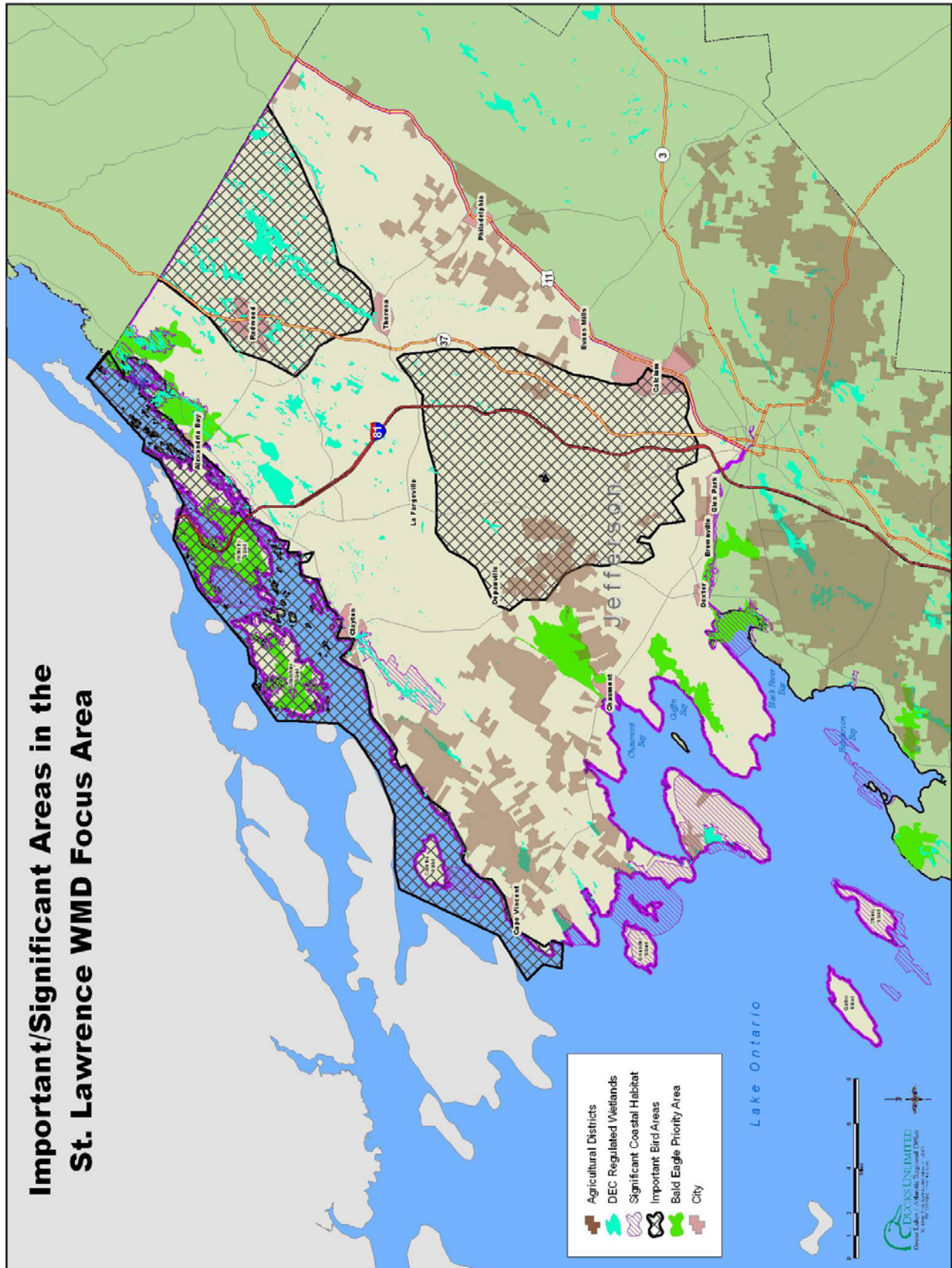
Henslow's sparrows, it would also be adequate for meeting the needs of a larger, more diverse suite of species.

The Service and its partners also recognize the significant opportunity to expand existing blocks of protected conservation lands in or near the focus area. That includes ownership by federal, state, conservation-oriented, non-government organizations, land trusts, and private lands under conservation easement. There is also significant opportunity to implement land conservation and protection on lands that do not have conservation protection, but have been designated or recognized as important and significant for wildlife. Within those protected and designated lands, the Service has identified core lands that provide a high level of protection for wildlife and natural resources. Those areas provide good anchors for increasing connectivity and building easements and WPAs through SWAP.

Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the core areas, and include the following:

- **St. Lawrence Islands National Park (Canada)**
- **The St. Lawrence – Frontenac Arch Biosphere Reserve (Canada, UNESCO)**
- **Ft. Drum (U.S. Army Installation)**
- **Several large State Wildlife Management Areas (DEC)**
- **Several State Parks (OPRHP)**
- **The Chaumont Barrens (The Nature Conservancy)**
- **Private lands within the Thousand Islands Land Trust, the Indian River Lakes Conservancy, and the Ontario Bays Initiative**
- **Private lands already under some form of Farm Bill conservation easement**
- **Private lands within Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program (U.S. FWS)**
- **Lands designated as Important Bird Areas (New York Audubon)**
- **Lands designated as Significant Coastal Fish and Wildlife Habitats (NY Dept. of State)**

Figure 3. Important/Significant Areas in the Focus Area



[illegible]

The three priority acquisition zones follow (see figure 5).

Priority 1

This zone includes the Thousand Island Region and the entire coastal zone adjacent to eastern Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River. The western boundary is the International border with Canada. We based our delineation of the eastern boundary on the best available information about the biological



Bald eagles find crucial habitat in the St. Lawrence Valley, Peter Nye, NYS DEC

needs of mallards and Henslow's sparrows, drawing upon expert opinion and field experience. This zone also includes wildlife habitat essential for wintering bald eagles and other raptors. Key anchors, which we can expand on to increase connectivity, are several state wildlife management areas and state parks, TNC lands, Thousand Island Land Trust (TILT) lands and private lands with existing conservation easements. This zone also includes all designated Significant Coastal Fish and Wildlife Habitats in the focus area and three Important Bird Areas (IBAs).

Priority 2

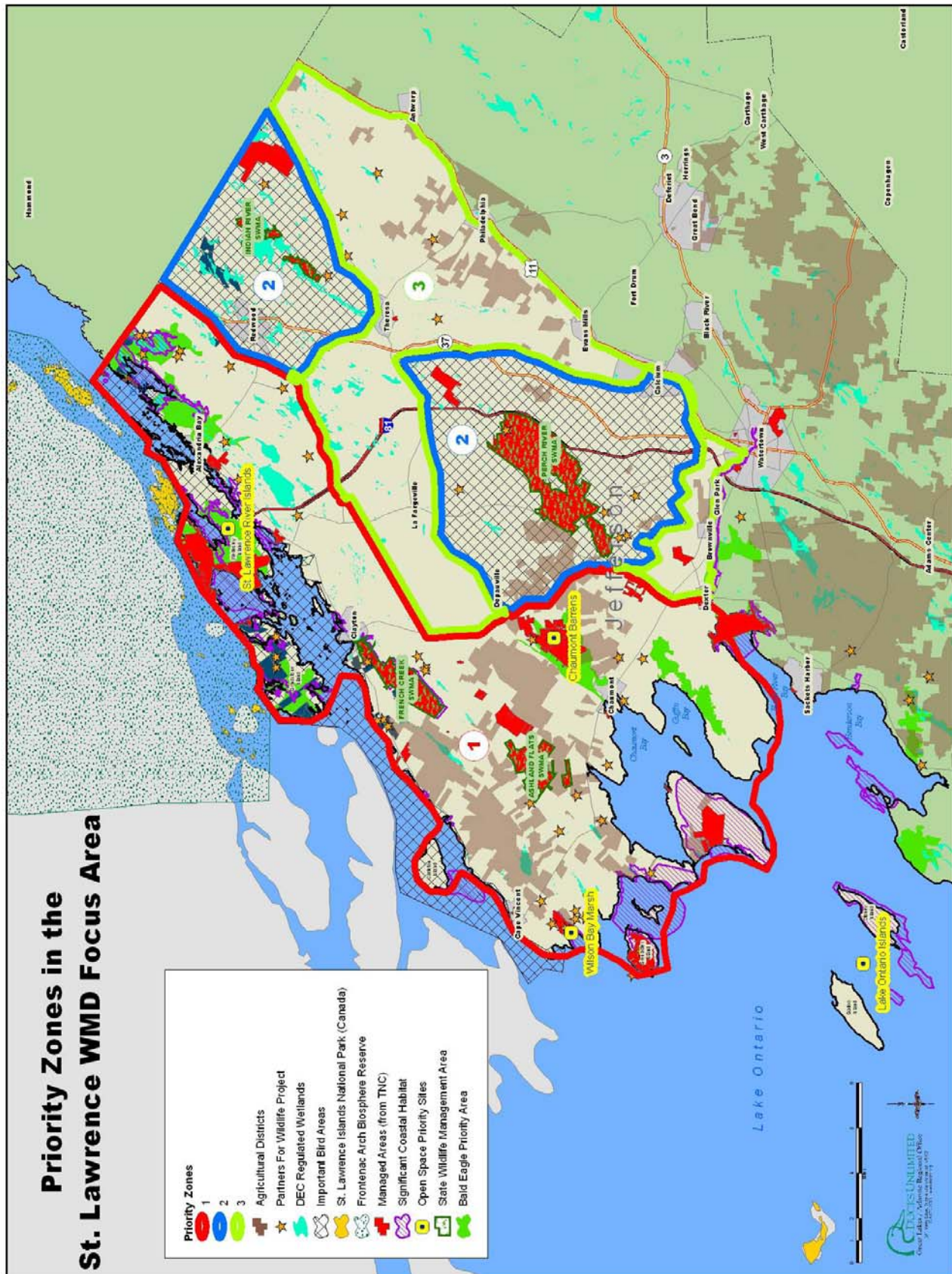
This zone includes two separate areas that share several similarities and features. Both areas have at their core a State Wildlife Management Area (the Perch River WMA and the Indian River WMA) also surrounded by a designated Important Bird Area (Perch River Complex IBA and Indian River/Black Lakes IBA). Both areas in this zone contain diverse, abundant wetland complexes, agricultural grasslands and early successional habitats, and support an exceptional wetland and grassland bird community. The WMAs are managed specifically for wildlife conservation, and the Perch River WMA supports one of the largest concentrations of breeding grassland birds

in New York. The New York Audubon recommends starting a conservation management plan to work cooperatively with farmers and private landowners in the IBAs to conserve agricultural lands beneficial for grassland birds.

Priority 3

This zone includes the remaining areas in the focus area, and contains abundant wetlands, potholes and tributaries, as well as large, contiguous blocks of grassland habitat.

Figure 5. Priority Zones in the Focus Area



Acquisition Alternatives

We will use primarily the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund (MBCF) to acquire wetlands and lands in fee title for designation as waterfowl production areas. MBCF monies derive from the sale of Federal Duck Stamps.

We also propose to acquire conservation easements, principally by using the MBCF in our Region 5 acquisition allocation, supplemented by funds appropriated under the Land and Water Conservation Act (LWCF). The LWCF applies more widely for protecting uplands and grasslands than others do. LWCF funds derive primarily from oil and gas leases on the outer continental shelf, motorboat fuel taxes, and sales of surplus federal property. General tax revenues do not generate LWCF funds.

Another fund we may use is the Fish Enhancement, Mitigation, and Research Fund (FEMRF), established as part of the hydropower re-licensing agreement for the St. Lawrence–Franklin D. Roosevelt Power Project. The Service manages the FEMRF to fund projects in the Lake Ontario/St. Lawrence River Basin that will benefit aquatic habitats and wetlands and species of special concern, ecological or economic importance, and species listed under the Endangered Species Act.

Project funds may also come from Challenge Cost Share Agreements, donated funds, the Partner for Fish and Wildlife Program, the North American Wetlands Conservation Act (NAWCA), and one-time allocations. Other sources (such as TNC, Ducks Unlimited, and other private and public partners) may fund management activities associated with easements and WPAs.

Coordination

We have discussed our entire proposal with landowners, conservation organizations, government officials, and other interested groups and individuals. The proposal and its associated EA address the protection of

important habitats, primarily through Service acquisition of land in fee title and conservation easements on wetland and grassland under the direction of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

We held several scoping meetings in 2005 with county legislators, town supervisors, and the Towns of Adams, Alexandria Bay, Cape Vincent, and Clayton, the City of Philadelphia, the NYSDEC, and members of the Jefferson County Farm Bureau and Save the River organization. Approximately 200 people attended those meetings, and most expressed their support for the project

Sociocultural Considerations

The economy of the St. Lawrence Valley is primarily agrarian. Dairy farming and other types of agriculture dominate private land use in the focus area. The human population is relatively sparse, and towns are widely scattered.



Agriculture dominates land use in the focus area, USFWS

Private lands are used for hunting, fishing, and other outdoor pursuits. The valley attracts a seasonal influx of tourists seeking opportunities to camp, canoe and fish, observe wildlife, and enjoy the islands. Alexandria Bay and Clayton are “gateway” communities for recreational activities in the Thousand Islands Region.

When land protection programs have been proposed or implemented in the past, residents, landowners and local government officials have expressed concern about the impact on the local tax base. We understand that concern,

and it has shaped this land protection proposal. Consequently, easements will predominate in the land protection we use to achieve our conservation objectives in the focus area. We will acquire land in fee title and establish WPAs on a limited basis, in cooperation with local town government, and with community support.

The money we pay for easements becomes another source of income for the landowners, who likely will spend part of that money locally or in the region. Fee title acquisition would yield similar economic benefits. Conversely, the development of rural landscapes often increases the demand for town or municipal services resulting in higher costs to rural counties, costs that they likely would not incur if the rural landscape were to remain intact.

Rural and farming livelihoods depend on natural resources (grass, water, and open space). The key to protecting the natural resources of the valley lies primarily in sustaining its current pattern of farming and low-density use. We do not expect this land protection proposal to cause any significant changes in the sociocultural climate in the valley, but rather, to help sustain its current climate.

